

The Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth Project

October 2002

Background

Many educators and administrators in school districts throughout Michigan have requested information and technical assistance to help them create school environments that are physically and emotionally safe for all students including sexual minority students (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning). Schools throughout Michigan and the nation have struggled to develop policies and train staff and students to support safe and “bully-free” environments that are conducive to students learning. This project was initiated as a direct response to school district requests.

The Workgroup

A wealth of information and resources has been published in the last decade in books, professional journals, and websites that related to school environment and sexual minority youth. In the summer of 2001, a statewide Michigan workgroup dedicated to Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth including teachers, health educators, counselors, parents, and legal professionals was convened. The workgroup reviewed and recommended resources for a guide to be disseminated to regional school health coordinators and interested school districts throughout Michigan. The workgroup was lead by consultants from the Calhoun Intermediate School District (ISD) with significant experience providing workshops for school personnel on issues regarding safe schools for sexual minority youth. The work of the group was supported by the Michigan Department of Education.

The Problem

Sexual minority youth often face harassment, abuse, and violence from classmates in school settings that put them at greater risk for serious problems such as substance abuse, HIV, and suicide, as well as school failure and dropout. The 1999 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (MA YRBS) documented that sexual minority students are four times more likely to attempt suicide and three times more likely to be threatened or injured with a weapon at school. For more information from the MA YRBS go to www.doe.mass.edu/lss/yrbs99/glb_rslts.html. The long-term effects have been documented in numerous national, state, and local reports including *Bruised Bodies, Bruised Spirits: An Assessment of the Current Climate of Safety for Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth in Southeastern Michigan Schools* (1996).

The Michigan Department of Education Model Student Code of Conduct

According to the Michigan Department of Education Model Student Code of Conduct (2001), bullying harassment or intimidation includes, but is not limited to, such a gesture or written, verbal, or physical act, that is reasonably perceived as being motivated by a student’s religion, race, color, national origin, age, sex, sexual orientation, disability, height, weight, socioeconomic status, or by any other distinguishing characteristic. For a complete copy of the Model Code of Conduct, go to <http://www.michigansafeschools.org/model-conduct-final.htm>. For more information and resources on the Michigan Office of Safe Schools website go to <http://www.michigansafeschools.org/>

The Resource Guide

The *A Silent Crisis: Creating Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth* resource guide includes a wealth of information for teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and other professionals who want to learn more about issues related to safe schools for sexual minority youth. The guide was produced and compiled by Calhoun Intermediate School District in cooperation with the Michigan Department of Education with the guidance of the Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth workgroup. The guide is printed and distributed by the Educational Materials Center, Central Michigan University. Those who participate in the *A Silence Crisis: Creating Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth* trainings receive the resource guide as part of the workshop. Additional copies of the resource guide can be purchased from Central Michigan University Educational Materials Center (EMC) for \$30.00. To request a copy, call 1-800-214-8961 or email the EMC at emc@cmich.edu.

Dedication

The resource guide has been dedicated to the sexual minority students who have endured emotional and physical threats and struggled to find a safe place within school to live and learn. Their voices must not be forgotten.

Workshops for School Personnel

The Michigan Department of Education has supported regional *A Silent Crisis: Creating Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth* trainings for school personnel who want to learn more about issues related to this population and strategies for creating safer schools. The trainings are lead by experienced trainers at Calhoun Intermediate School District. As of the fall of 2002, trainings have been implemented in three intermediate school districts, and more than 180 school personnel have attended those trainings. Contact Bob Higgins at (616) 789-2415 or higginsb@calhoun-isd.k12.mi.us or Holly White at (616) 789-2434 or whiteh@calhoun-isd.k12.mi.us for more information about upcoming *A Silent Crisis* trainings.

Is My Schools Safe for Everyone Posters

Several members of the workgroup developed a poster that reinforced some of the main messages of the Safe Schools for SMY project. To view an on-line version of the poster, go to www.aidsprevention.org/poster.htm. The poster emphasizes using non-judgemental comments and speaking up to combat prejudice. It is written by educators for educators and fits well into any anti-bullying or safe schools initiative. An [order form](#) is available for educators who would like the order the poster from Midwest AIDS Prevention Project.

What Education and Community Leaders Say About the Project

As educators we must be committed to address all issues that impact the health, safety, and educational needs of our children. I applaud the work group for their efforts in developing “A Silent Crisis: Creating Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth.” This resource guide is an invaluable tool for educators as they work to create safe and supportive school environments for all students including sexual minority youth.

Thomas D. Watkins, Jr.
Superintendent of Public Instruction
Michigan Department of Education
Lansing, MI

“A Silent Crisis” was a very worthwhile workshop – actually one of the few in many years to be immediately relevant to my daily work. I discovered resources I didn’t know about and was able to use the materials and information with colleagues and students.

Michelle Bean, MSW
School Social Worker
Fitzgerald High School
Warren, MI

“A Silent Crisis” training provided critical information and skills to help educators, administrators, and board members deal more effectively with the issue of school safety for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. This training is a must for school districts throughout Michigan. The issue of safe schools needs to be addressed at the policy level in order to effect and sustain change.

Susan Corbin
Board Member
Okemos Public Schools
Okemos, MI

When I signed up for the “Silent Crisis” seminar, I wasn’t sure what to expect. What I got was a very informative day. I learned some amazing statistics on how many students may be affected by the “silent crisis.” I learned about the situations these students face on a daily basis and, most importantly, I learned about the legal responsibility of the school district to provide a safe learning environment for these students. As a school board member, it is part of my responsibilities to set the policies to ensure that the schools are safe for ALL students.

The information learned, the resource manual received, and the contacts made have already been put to use at least two times in situations that have come up in our school district within the past six weeks. It was a very beneficial day for both me, personally, and for the district through the information I was able to bring back and share.

Bonnie B. Reemsnyder
Board Member
Pottersville Public Schools
Pottersville, MI

“A Silent Crisis” gave a remarkable look into the issues specifically facing the educational system and sexual minority youth. It also provided a useful insight into the general issues that face any institution, such as law enforcement, that works within the educational setting.

Martin Underhill, MA
Chief of Police
Grand Ledge, MI

The resource manual for “A Silent Crisis” is superb. It offers vital information in an easy to find format. Every educator needs this timely manual to deal with this ever-growing concern. These kids need and deserve our help.

Ben Walker, MA, CPC
Director
Arts Academy in the Woods
Warren, MI

I want to thank the Michigan Department of Education in their advocacy for safe schools for all of their students. As a physician who takes care of adolescents, I have witnessed the consequences of harassment of sexual minority youth at our schools including depression, suicidal behavior, school drop out, drug and alcohol use, and sexual risk taking. This resource guide and training will save the lives and futures of many of our marginalized youth.

Kathryn Wright, DO
Medical Director, Horizons Project
Adolescent HIV Program
Children’s Hospital of Michigan
Detroit, MI

For More Information

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